



September 29, 2009

A buffet of diets

Local dietitians and weight loss experts grade an assortment of popular diet plans for their healthfulness, long-term potential

By *KELLY BOTHUM*
The News Journal

There's one four-letter word that's printable in a family newspaper: diet. We profess to hate them, but it's apparent Americans love them. We spend more than \$40 billion each year on diet programs and related products. We devour meal replacement bars, inhale frappe weight-loss smoothies and swallow fat-busting pills, all in the hopes of losing the flab spilling out of our pants and hanging under our arms.

And yet, 67 percent of us are either overweight or obese, according to health statistics last year from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

So why the disconnect between the claims made by popular diets and the actual weight lost by real people who follow the plans? For starters, it's hard to keep up an all-or-nothing eating plan, said Susan Burke March, author of "Making Weight Control Second Nature: Living Thin Naturally." After three days of eating nothing but cabbage soup, you probably never want to lay eyes on a cabbage. Or if a low-carb diet forbids you from eating bread, it's that much harder to keep up the momentum.

"Diets are just that. They are fads that people typically can't stick with," said Stella Volpe, a registered dietitian and research associate with the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing. "To do well, people might need to make big change and understand if they want to lose 12 pounds, they're not going to do it in a week."

Still, it can be hard to resist the lure of quick weight loss, especially when some of the fad diets make it look so easy. We asked registered dietitians and weight loss experts to offer their opinions on some of the popular weight loss plans on the market today. Here's what they had to say:

GI diet

What it is: GI refers to the glycemic index, which is a system of ranking carbohydrate portions based on how much they affect a person's blood sugar levels. Foods are ranked from 0 to 100, with the top number being the equivalent of pure glucose. Typically, foods are rated high (greater than 70), low (less than 55) or moderate (56 to 69). Low-GI foods are typically absorbed more slowly, allowing dieters to feel full longer and help control appetite.

The index was developed to help diabetics better control their diet and glucose levels, but over the years it has become a weight loss tool as well. It provides the basis for other diets, including the South Beach Diet and the Zone diet.

What's good about it: In addition to focusing on low-GI foods, the diet promotes regular exercise and the consumption of lean protein, whole grains and unsaturated fats, all of which are healthy in the long term, said Tracey Sinibaldi, a registered dietitian with Bayhealth Medical Center in Dover.

What to watch out for: There are multiple versions of the GI diet online, Sinibaldi said, so it can be confusing to know which one to follow. Differences in nutritional content and how a food is prepared also can mean a difference in the GI score, she said. The way the index is set up, a high-fat, unhealthy food like a candy bar can get a better GI score than a baked potato. As a result, she said, some people may get the idea they're eating healthfully when they're not.

Bottom line: Eating more vegetables and lean protein is always a good idea, but you shouldn't have to look at a chart to know a baked potato is a better choice than a candy bar.

Zone diet

What it is: Based on the book "Enter the Zone" by Massachusetts Institute of Technology researcher Barry Sears, the Zone is a diet plan that advocates eating 30 percent of your calories each from protein and fat, with the remaining 40 percent from carbohydrates. Dieters are supposed to eat that same "block, combination of protein, fat and carbs at every meal, including snacks.

What's good about it: The diet promotes foods from the lower glycemic index and offers healthy menu combinations, including recommended portion sizes, based on the block meal idea, Sinibaldi said. The diet itself also is fairly easy to follow, which makes it easier for people to stick with it.

What to watch out for: Although proponents of the Zone say it can help people with heart disease, high blood pressure and diabetes, the only evidence backing those claims is anecdotal, Sinibaldi said. The diet also is higher in fat and protein consumption than traditional weight loss plans.

Bottom line: As far as fad diets go, this one has some merit, but don't believe the hype.

Raw food diet

What it is: The focus of this diet is consuming unprocessed, uncooked foods entirely from plants. Adherents to the diet don't heat food above 166 degrees Fahrenheit because anything above that destroys the food enzymes that aid in digestion and absorption. Based on this rule, dried fruits and vegetables are permissible because they aren't heated that high. No alcohol, caffeine or sugars are permitted.

What's good about it: The diet is made up of whole grains, leafy vegetables and high-fiber foods, which can aid in decreasing obesity and cholesterol levels. The exclusion of refined sugars or processed products makes it healthier than other eating plans.

What to watch out for: Despite the concern about heat killing those important enzymes, Sinibaldi said, our bodies already make those enzymes to help us digest our food and absorb nutrients. And heating some foods actually improves their nutritional content. Tomatoes have a higher level of lycopene when they are cooked than when raw. Carrots also have more beta carotene when heated, she said.

Bottom line: It may help introduce you to a healthier food lifestyle, but if you're someone who eats on the go or likes meat and dairy products, it's not going to work.

Vegan diet

What it is: In many ways, a vegan diet is like a less-strict version of the raw food diet. People who follow a vegan diet have made a decision not to eat any animal-based foods or wear products that came from an animal, such as leather. In many cases, it's based on spiritual, cultural or personal beliefs rather than a desire to lose weight. (A side note: Lacto-ovo vegetarians don't eat meat, but do

consume eggs and dairy products.)

What's good about it: With some planning, a vegan could have a nutritionally sound and long-term eating plan, Volpe said. Vegans eat fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts and seeds, with the focus being on the quality rather than the quantity of foods. Many vegans opt for organic or locally grown foods in an attempt to reduce the environmental impact. Healthwise, a vegetarian-based eating plan has been shown to decrease the risk for heart disease and diabetes.

What to watch out for: As with the raw food diet, variety is the key. Despite the fact that what they're eating is good for them, dieters have to worry about potential nutritional deficiencies, particularly in vitamin B12 and iron, which come from protein sources, and calcium from dairy, Volpe said. "Some people think, 'It's a vegetarian diet -- therefore it's more healthy, so I don't have to think about what I'm eating,' " she said. "Even though they don't have to take all their amino acids at one sitting, they still need to be aware of the variety."

Bottom line: There's plenty of opportunities for healthy eating, but the more restrictive you are in your food choices, the greater the chance for nutritional deficiency.

Maker's diet

What it is: "Eat the biblical way" ought to be the slogan for this diet. (It's not.) But while on the 40-day Maker's diet, dieters are instructed to eat food created by God. That means no processed foods and artificial sweeteners. Fruits and vegetables should be organically grown. Meat, dairy and grain products should come from animals and fish that were raised in a healthy and humane way and with minimal processing. Exercise and prayer also are components of the diet.

What's good about it: In addition to an emphasis on eating more naturally, the diet tackles topics like emotional eating. And although people do not have to believe in God to follow the diet, they are encouraged to think about living a life of purpose and finding the connection between body and spirit.

What to watch out for: While there are healthy components of the diet, not everyone may be willing to give up crabs or search out full-fat yogurt. "It's not dangerous by any means, but it's restrictive in the sense that a lot of foods are absolutely restricted: pork, shellfish, lobster and crab," said Marianne Carter, a registered dietitian and director of the Delaware Center for Health Promotion.

Bottom line: This diet answers to a higher authority, but can you follow all the rules?

Flat belly diet

What it is: Belly fat is an area nearly all of us would like to improve. This diet, by the folks at Prevention magazine, offers two big rules to make that happen: eat 400 calories four times a day, and make sure each of those meals includes a serving of MUFAs, which stands for monounsaturated fatty acids. Think peanut butter, olive oil, nuts and -- yes -- dark chocolate.

What's good about it: Unlike some starvation diets, this one does encourages eating 1,600 calories spread over regular intervals. "To be honest, any individual who is overconsuming calories who goes on a 1,600-calorie-a-day program will lose weight," Carter said.

What to watch out for: Despite the assertion that the consumption of MUFAs will help target belly fat, there's no evidence to back up the claim, Carter said. Same goes for the "sassy water" that's touted in the four-day jump start. "There's no science proving it," she said.

Bottom line: Although the stomach is the first place many people lose weight, don't expect an hour-glass figure or washboard abs solely because of this diet.

Mediterranean diet

What it is: This diet has not only been credited with helping people to live healthier, but also longer. It's based on the diet of Mediterranean countries, which includes plenty of fruits, vegetables, fish and small portions of nuts and seeds. Most of the flavor comes from fresh herbs and spices instead of salt. They also drink one or two glasses of wine a day.

What's good about it: Research studies have shown the Mediterranean diet can cut the risk of heart disease, Sinibaldi said. And it's a much more inclusive diet than other eating plans because nothing, for the most part, is restricted. Smaller, leaner cuts of meat are encouraged rather than excluded.

What to watch out for: It's hard to find many problems with this eating plan because it's so nutritionally balanced, March said. But moderation is the key, so don't let one or two glasses of red wine turn into a whole bottle.

Bottom line: Think of this diet as more of a lifestyle.

Atkins diet

What it is: This diet has been around since the 1970s, but it picked up steam about 10 years ago as a way for people to lose a lot of weight in a short time. Atkins drastically restricts carbohydrate intake, allowing the body to go into ketosis, which means it burns its own fat for fuel. In ketosis, people typically feel less hungry and eat less than they otherwise would. In lieu of carbs, dieters eat larger portions of protein and fat, including the saturated fats ordinarily banished from other diets.

What makes it good: Some people who have diabetes have had success with managing their condition using a similar low-carb, high-protein diet, Carter said. For other people following the diet, weight loss is usually rapid.

What to watch out for: Because the diet doesn't limit saturated fats, there are concerns about the increased risk of heart disease. "Every single major health organization is promoting more fruits and vegetables, more whole grains, and this is in direct contrast," Carter said. "If we're trying to push Americans to more of a plant-based plan, this is doing the opposite."

On the weight loss front, a 2005 study of four major diets, including Atkins, found that the low-carb regimen resulted in the least amount of weight loss after a year. The study by Tufts-New England Medical Center in Boston and published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, found that Atkins dieters lost 4.6 pounds after a year, compared with 7.1 pounds for Zone dieters and 6.6 pounds for those on Weight Watchers.

Bottom line: Weight loss isn't meant to be a sprint, but rather a marathon. Be sure you can sustain your eating plan.

Weight Watchers

What it is: Here's another diet that's been around for a long time, albeit in different forms. It uses a calorie-controlled approach that also looks at fat and fiber. Unlike many other health plans, Weight Watchers also focuses on group support, usually through weekly weigh-ins.

What makes it good: Over the years, Weight Watchers has evolved into a flexible plan, Carter said, which makes it easier to stick with. Most people use the points system, which assigns foods certain numbers based on calories, fat and fiber. Dieters are given a certain number of points they can eat in a given day based on their weight. No foods are restricted; it's up to dieters to decide how they want

to use their points. "That's such an important premise -- all foods can fit," Carter said.

What to watch out for: Not everybody may be into counting numbers when they eat. And there are plenty of people out there who don't want to share their weight with loved ones, let alone a stranger at a meeting.

Bottom line: If weight loss success isn't rocket science, can it be simple math?

South Beach diet

What it is: Like the Atkins diet, the South Beach diet is the creation of a medical doctor. Cardiologist Arthur Agatston, of the Mount Sinai Cardiac Prevention Center in Miami Beach, created the diet, which is likened to a hybrid of a low-fat and low-carb eating plan. There is no calorie-counting or specific portion sizes, and snacking is recommended. The key is the kind of food you eat -- vegetables, low-fat foods and carbs with a low glycemic load.

What's good about it: Once you get past the induction phase, there are no restrictions on foods. Dieters are encouraged to tailor the diet to their own eating and exercise habits, making it a lifestyle choice rather than a short-term diet.

What to watch out for: The first phase of the diet plan is fairly intense -- no fruit, no rice and no alcohol, among other restrictions. Although those no-nos are lifted in later phases, some dieters will give up before they get there.

Bottom line: For some dieters with the will, South Beach may be the way.

Your-name-here diet

What it is: Never heard of this diet? That's because there's no multimillion-dollar marketing behind it and, well, it's not really an official diet at all. Instead, it's the idea that the best diet for you is the one you'll stick with. Working with a registered dietitian can help point you in the right direction and make you feel supported. Look for someone who teaches strategies like behavior modification, uses food journaling and encourages physical activity and accountability, said Andrea Spivack, a registered dietitian with the Albert J. Stunkard Weight Management Program at the University of Pennsylvania.

What's good about it: A structured meal plan helps people feel in control of their eating, March said. It gives them goals to strive for -- three fruits a day or two servings of lean protein, for example -- and a blueprint for maintaining their success.

What to watch out for: Anticipate change. When you lose weight, your body no longer needs as many calories, so you may have to adjust to eating less than you did before, Volpe said. Our metabolism also changes as we age, meaning some of us can't eat the way we used to without additional exercise.

And don't be surprised to find out you have been eating for reasons other than hunger that need to be addressed. "They're eating because they're stressed or angry or bored," March said. "They overeat because of emotional problems."

Bottom line: There's no one-size-fits-all diet for everybody." or
